

WIDOWS COPING WITH LIVING ALONE

PEGGY A. MILLER

WIDOWS COPING WITH LIVING ALONE:
"I THINK ALL WE EVER DO IS ADJUST."

✱ Peggy A. Miller

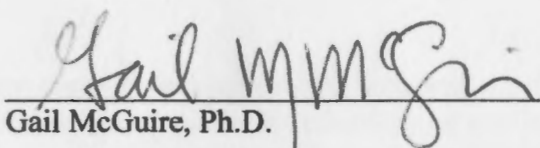
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Acceptance Page

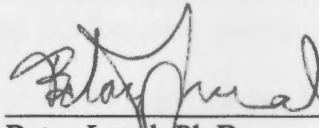
Accepted by the Graduate Faculty, Indiana University, in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Master of Liberal Studies.

This thesis is dedicated to my extraordinary family who supported the dream of a middle-aged woman to attend college at the age of forty-seven. Tami and Mark, my children, encouraged me to finally do what I wanted to do. Doug, my husband, provided a persistent and a never-ending faith in me. I am grateful for the necessary work and love and Roger, my beautiful grandson. I am grateful for the power of unconditional love. My life is blessed with the love of their love and my belief in a God who gives all people.


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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my extraordinary family who supported the dream of a middle-aged woman to attend college at the age of forty-seven: Tammy and Mark, my children, encouraged me to finally do what I wanted to do; Doug, my husband, provided a persistent and a never-ending faith in my ability to complete the necessary work; and, Jenna and Regan, my beautiful granddaughters, renewed my faith in the power of unconditional love. My life is blessed beyond measure because of their love and my belief in a God who gives all people the capacity to love one another.

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I would also like to thank the thirteen women who volunteered their time as research participants. Their willingness to allow a stranger into their homes and to share very painful aspects of their experiences as widows will never be forgotten. They were the heroes who gave life and credibility to this thesis work.

Table of Contents

Acceptance Page.....	ii
Dedication.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Method.....	10
Analysis and Discussion.....	20
Conclusion.....	60
Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research.....	70
Reflection.....	71
Appendix A – Demographic Detail.....	73
Appendix B – Questionnaire Protocol.....	74
Appendix C – Cover Letter.....	76
Appendix D – Study Information Sheet.....	77
Appendix E – Grief Support Agencies.....	78
References.....	79
Vita Page	

Widows Coping With Living Alone: "I think all we ever do is adjust."

Introduction

In the fall of 2000, I conducted a closed-ended survey which focused on socioeconomic factors influencing the contentment of women who live alone after the death of a husband. A telephone survey (utilizing closed-ended response choices) was used to collect data from forty widows. The dialogue over and above the required responses revealed a great deal more about the complexities of widows' experiences than their answers to the survey questions. Each respondent wanted to share the rest of her story. The goal of this study was two-fold in design: to explore the coping strategies employed by widows as they make the transition from living with a long-term partner to living alone, and to explore gender socialization in the context of their adjustment experiences.

The study sought to answer the following questions: (1) How does a widow achieve a successful adjustment to living alone? (2) How does she restructure relationships? (3) How does she find new meaning and purpose? (4) And how does she create a new identity? A thorough exploration of the instrumental and emotional tasks involved in adjustment after the death of a husband may offer valuable information for those who work with and assist older widowed women with successful life reconstruction. In permitting older women the opportunity to define their widowed experiences, counselors, caregivers, educators, and others involved in the development of

solution-based strategies can become more effective in providing assistance to increasing numbers of older Americans who have been labeled the “silent majority” (www.aoa.gov). This study seeks to give voice to the experiences of older widowed women.

Rationale

Older people living alone comprise a growing segment of the American population. According to the Administration on Aging (2001), eighty percent of all older persons living alone in 2000 were women. Women live an average of seven years longer than men do; and life expectancy for future cohorts of the elderly is predicted to favor women. In addition to advantages in life expectancy, women are more likely to marry men who are older—this creates disparities in marital status late in life. In 2000, seventy-three percent of men sixty-five and older were married versus only forty-three percent of women sixty-five and older. There were four times as many widows as there were widowers. By the year 2020, older women will account for eighty-five percent of all adults sixty-five and older who live alone. Seven out of ten baby boom women (born between 1946 and 1964) are expected to outlive their husbands. They can expect to be widows for fifteen to twenty years (www.aoa.gov).

The increasing numbers of elderly women living alone create very complex social and psychological adjustments at a time when they are often ill-equipped to deal with the challenges of life reconstruction. According to the Holmes and Rahe’s (1967) Social Readjustment Scale, the death of a spouse is the highest-ranking stressor of all life events experienced. Research (Fry, 1998) has shown that a conscious effort must be made to adapt successfully to widowhood: “Spousal loss late in life is widely accepted as being a very stressful experience accompanied by salient changes in individuals’

perceptions of their overall life adjustment, psychological functioning, and mental outlook. Adjustment or coping is behavior that permits us to meet the demands of the environment" (p. 369). Women who have experienced long-term married relationships must cope with enormous change and multiple losses when husbands die.

Literature Review

Scholarly research on bereavement provided information which identified specific tasks involved in adjusting to living alone after the death of a spouse. Existing literature on life reconstruction and widowhood provided explanation and focus for the analysis process. A theoretical assessment of gender as a social system, which organizes social relations in everyday life and in major institutional structures, provided a feminist perspective to explore the experiences of the women in this study. It is understood that gender refers to the culturally and socially constructed differences between females and males found in the meanings, beliefs, and practices associated with femininity and masculinity. Gender identity (what it means to be a woman or a man) is the self-perception of the person as a female or male; and gender role (expectations for masculine or feminine behavior) is the attitudes, behaviors, and activities that are socially appropriate for males and females (Kendall, 2000).

Widowhood produces a grief experience different from all other losses. Alan Wolfelt (1992), director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition in Fort Collins, Colorado, described bereavement as the process of "healing" from the death of a loved one. He further claimed that the healing process requires the use of all personal resources because grief affects the individual physically, emotionally and spiritually. The bereaved

person must work through specific steps of "reconciliation" in order to make a successful adjustment.

The bereaved must face the reality of the death and regain the capacity to enjoy experiences in life which were normally enjoyable prior to the death. This includes a release from a preoccupation with the deceased and a return to stable eating and sleeping patterns. A widow must regain her capacity to organize and plan her life toward the future as well as welcome more change in her life. Although grief may linger for years or may never diminish totally, the widow must be able to find a new reality, meaning, and purpose in life after the death of a spouse. Constructing new and reestablishing old healthy relationships is important. She must develop the capacity to adjust to the new role changes that have resulted from the death of her husband. Finally, she must come to acknowledge new parts of herself that have been discovered through the process of grieving the loss of her husband (Wolfelt, 1992).

Muller and Thompson's (2003) in-depth interviews with bereaved adults provided evidence that the coping strategies of individuals change over time. Their results suggested that social support, as well as the perception of social support, was beneficial to a successful bereavement process. Some form of companion therapy, which involved mutual sharing and support, was found important to a successful adjustment after the death of a loved one. Participants in Muller and Thompson's research confirmed that having someone who could listen sympathetically and having support from people who respect and accept the way they want to grieve is essential to adjustment. Being able to talk to others who have been through similar experiences, as well as reminiscing about the deceased with others, was essential in supportive relationships. The bereaved

identified a good quality of life as one that was happy, fulfilling and involved with minimal pain and suffering. They also spoke of getting back into a routine because structure helped them get through the day. Muller and Thompson concluded that there is a final stage to the bereavement process which signals a successful adjustment to life reconstruction after the death of a husband.

In keeping with the theme of stages, Steeves and Kahn (1995) identified the tasks as (1) retelling the story of the life and death of the loved one until the emotional pain begins to dissipate, (2) restructuring the family and other social groups so that many of the roles of the missing family member are filled by others, and (3) working out a new relationship with the memory or ongoing presence of the deceased (Steeves and Kahn, 1995). These tasks were not always discrete and did not necessarily follow a specific order; but they were consistent and recognizable. Steeves (2002) argued that bereavement is a socially constructed process because the death of a loved one takes place in social networks and the people in these networks influence the content of the narratives of the bereaved. It was in the context of relationships that the bereaved viewed, tested, and explored their changed social world. In the third stage (about six months after the death) of adjustment, the emotion dominating this stage was not grief but loneliness. Having someone to talk with, someone to share a meal, someone to consult, and someone with whom to be intimate was what the widow may miss the most. The loneliness did not disappear; but it did not interfere with the participants' ability to restructure their lives. In Steeves's research, this final stage did not last more than a few months, and he recognized variations in the timeframes of these stages with all participants.

Deborah van den Hoonaard's (2001) extensive research with older widows led her to conclude that women see the transition to widowhood as a process which involves finding new meaning and purpose through everyday interactions with others. It is in the unfolding of this social and emotional process that women were confronted with learning new skills in order to replace the husband's functional role in the partnership. She discovered that widows experienced the loss of couple friends at a time when they were managing many other major changes in their lives. Widows had to develop, define, and negotiate new friendships. They often had to negotiate a different type of relationship with adult children as well. It is in everyday interactions with friends and family that older women created positive or negative interpretations of the widowhood process.

Wolfelt, Muller, Thompson,*Steeves, and Kahn's research was important to understanding the grief process as a series of emotional and social adjustments; but their work neglected the impact of gender as a socializing structure in the lives of the bereaved. Although these researchers mentioned the need to rebuild self-identity and the need to restructure and redefine social roles and support systems, there is no connection drawn to how gender may have affected life reconstruction after the death. Since their marriages were structured to delineate distinctions between husband and wife as well as father and mother, it follows that the end of a long-term marriage due to the death of a spouse would create confusion and a sense of being lost.

Van den Hoonaard's research described the system of relationships in which a widow is involved, as well as the social processes involved in the negotiation of relationships; but the scope of her research interpretation did not incorporate gender as an organizing structure in those relationships. Women entering old age are burdened with

significant social challenges that result from gender inequalities experienced throughout the life cycle. Many older women find everyday situations a struggle after the husband's death; they cannot cope with living independently after many years of relying on their husbands for social and emotional support. Understanding how gender supports and organizes social order and behavior is essential to understanding the stress associated with widowhood.

West and Zimmerman (1987) argued that gender-specific activities are performed in the presence of others; and, in that sense, gender-specific behavior is viewed as an accomplishment or an achieved property of social behavior conduct. Participants in interaction with others organize their daily activities to reflect or express gender. Sex-role socialization is a learned function that begins at a very early age and continues throughout the life span. This socialization process is a life-long process of learning and achievement and impacts every aspect of daily activities.

In keeping with West and Zimmerman's argument, Lorber (1994) agreed that gender socialization is a process, one so powerful in Western society that "we assume it is bred into our genes" (p.13). She argued that everyone does gender and most people recreate gender relations in their interactions with others in order to achieve a specific social life which reflects either feminine or masculine characteristics. Gender is such an important part of our daily lives that it usually takes a deliberate disruption of how women and men are supposed to act in order to appreciate how it is produced in everyday interactions with others. Lorber concluded, "The work adults do as mothers and fathers and as low-level workers and high-level bosses, shapes women's and men's life experiences, and these experiences produce different feelings, consciousness,

relationships, skills—ways of being feminine or masculine” (p. 14). Personality characteristics, feelings, motivations and ambitions flow from these gendered life experiences and ultimately lead men and women to become different kinds of people.

This process of gendering and its outcome are legitimated by religion, law, science, and society’s entire set of values. Western society’s values perpetuate cultural gender norms by claiming that biological differences, which are embedded in female and male procreative processes, predestine different social roles for men and women. However, there is no essential femaleness or maleness, femininity or masculinity, womanhood or manhood. Once gender is ascribed, there are certain gendered norms and expectations placed on individuals’ conduct. The ascribed statuses limit or create opportunities; and, because gender differences are socially constructed, all men and all women can choose to adopt the other’s social script if so desired. If women and men choose to defy gendered cultural norms, they are often considered deviant and called to account for their failure to conform (Lorber, 1994).

Lorber contended that everyday gendered interactions build gender into the family, the work process and other organizations and institutions. It also ranks men above women of the same race and class and creates inequality. Women are expected to do work (without the benefits of pay) appropriate for their social roles, which includes most of the domestic labor and caregiving needs within the family structure. Gender divides work in the home and in economic production, legitimates those in authority and organizes sexuality and emotional life. A woman’s ascribed gender gives her a self-identity and provides a pattern for socially acceptable behavior. Examining how gender

organizes everyday interactions also demonstrates how behavior is constrained by this structure.

Interactionist theorists believe there is very little shared reality beyond that which is socially created. Erving Goffman (1959) suggested that day-to-day interactions have much in common with a dramatic production. As we interact with others on this social stage, we attempt to play out an assigned role while controlling the impressions we give others. Social order is a human production and is not derived from the laws of nature. It is in social interactions where most of the everyday work of getting along with others is performed and where the social world of specific segments of society creates meaning in their lives.

Berger and Luckmann (1967) referred to this process as the social construction of reality. They argued that in everyday life people share a culture, a language, and a set of meaning structures from the past and the present which allow them to negotiate life with each other. People do not come to know how to interact with others with a clean slate of knowledge; rather perceptions and behaviors are influenced by how situations are initially defined using established knowledge. Actions are then taken based on that moment of reality. These modes of thinking are continually reproduced when people share traditions and participate in institutions (e.g., religion, education, marriage, government, economy, and family) for the purpose of establishing stability within a society. It is in all these interrelated parts of an elaborated social system that people find meaning and purpose for conformity when they share a common set of values, beliefs, and behavioral expectations.

Berger and Luckmann connected the theories of Marx, Durkheim, and Weber when they argued people create their institutions; they interact with others in the institutions they create; and finally, they forget their role in creating and maintaining that reality. Social structure is an essential element of the reality of everyday life; it is affected to a greater degree by the frequency and intimacy of personal interactions within an individual's inner circle. Berger and Luckmann believed that people are capable of reconstructing their everyday lives with will and consciousness. However, for an older woman who has lived most of her life depending on a husband for emotional, economical, and social support, building a new life as a single woman places an enormous strain on her coping skills.

To appreciate the dynamics involved in restructuring almost every aspect of a widow's life, it was important to examine how as female actors women actively participate in constructing a new social reality without a husband. Some of today's older women have lived most of their lives in a culture relatively untouched by the changing social roles of women in the 21st century. Some have lived most of their married lives dependent on their husbands in ways that many of today's younger women do not. By building on the literature regarding life reconstruction after the death of a husband, this study further probed for an understanding of adjustment to widowhood and how that adjustment is connected to a widow's gender socialization.

Method

The purpose of this study was to discover how widowed women go about adjusting to living alone after the death of a husband from the perspective of the women who have experienced it. According to Jonathan Smith (1995), face to face interviewing,

as a method of social science research, allows the investigator to “gain a detailed pictured of a respondent’s beliefs about, or perceptions or accounts of, a particular topic” (p.9). This informal approach assists the researcher in pursuing pertinent topical themes which emerge in the interview process. Flexibility is particularly appealing to feminist researchers because it encourages the participants to drive the data collection. Niobe Way (1997) argued that research “grounded in women’s experiences, a voice-centered, relational approach” creates an active listening process in order to conceptualize the data as it is unfolding between the investigator and the participant (p.706). She also asserted that “the words of individuals cannot be separated from the cultural and societal context in which these words are embedded” (p.707). Experiences can only be understood from the perspective of the participant in the discovery of cultural and societal expectations which give life meaning to widows. A flexible protocol for questioning allowed the participants to define the themes that were most relevant to their own adjustment.

This method was well suited for the topic of interest, the age, and vulnerability of the women who volunteered to share their stories with a stranger. It was important to understand a widow’s perspective regarding her feelings about living alone and how her interactions with others may facilitate the adjustment to a new life. A feminist approach sought to identify ways in which norms, roles, institutions, and internalized expectations may impose limitations. A feminist approach sought to understand how women’s personal control operates within the constraints of relative lack of social power. Since this study explored social processes rather than attempt to offer causal explanations, face-to-face interviews permitted the participants to conceptualize in their own words the psychological, intellectual, spiritual and social challenges of living alone. Identifying

emotional reactions to specific themes of questioning was an important part of the data collection process.

Participants

Thirteen widows volunteered for this study. Since generalizability was not a goal in the design of this study, specific variables such as race, class, and ethnicity were not considered in the selection process. A smaller group of widows served the topic interest of this study. The women were recruited using a nonprobability snowball sampling method. Two widow support groups and a personnel administrator from a local retirement facility were contacted for referrals. These contacts became the project support leaders. An announcement was posted in a newsletter which was circulated in a second retirement community. One widow responded by telephone to this announcement. One widow was a referral from another participant. The remaining participants were recruited from the project support leaders' referrals. Only respondents matching the criteria were accepted for the study.

The study's qualification criteria (see Appendix A for demographic detail) included being sixty-five years of age and over; women who live alone and who were widowed for at least two years but no more than five years; and minimum marriage spans of at least fifteen years. Research (Meyers, 1990) has shown that by age sixty-five, roughly fifty percent of the women in the United States are already widowed; and by age seventy-five, nearly sixty-seven percent of all women have experienced a death of a spouse. Widows living alone were selected for the study because the presence of another person (relative or friend) living with a participant may influence the widow's perception of her independent coping skills. Parkes (1972) described the bereavement process

during the first year after the death of a spouse as "grief work." Establishing a two-year criterion after the death of a husband gave participants sufficient time to experience the various stages of grief and work through the challenges of living alone. Limiting the criteria to five years after the death produced conclusions about adjustment demands during the most critical years of life reconstruction. A fifteen-year criterion for marriage allowed for a selection of widows who had shared multiple and diverse life experiences with a long-term intimate companion. The commonalities in the experiences of this study's participants were remarkably similar to previous research regarding older widowed women.

The participants were women distinguished at a time in history by the Great Depression, World War II, and the Korean War. Most of their husbands served in the armed services and two participants were wives of career military men. These women had first-hand knowledge of what it meant to live through the longest period of economic hardship in America (1929-1939), either as young children witnessing the struggles of parents or as young adults striving to make ends meet. They were women who wanted and provided a better life for their children. They defined their position in the family as "housewife" and "homemaker." They were women who placed the desires of their husbands and children before their own: "Whatever he wanted. I usually did pretty much what he wanted" (Widow 1).

Although they were traditional homemakers, all the widows participated in paid employment at some point during the course of their marriages, usually before having children or after the children were in school. Three women held full time jobs for extended periods of time (fifteen to thirty years). Their marriages measured thirty-three

years (one widow was divorced when she was thirty-nine and remarried) to fifty-eight years, with a median marriage span of fifty-two years with the same partner. The women were born between 1918 and 1936; their ages ranged from sixty-eight to eighty-six, with a median age of seventy-nine. The majority were in reasonably good health for their ages. Widow One spoke of severe health problems which included cancer and debilitating arthritis. Widow Four was bi-polar and spoke of numerous medications being taken for various ailments. They were all white women with an educational achievement from eighth grade to four years of college. The participants resided in a small northern Midwest community which is more rural than urban and more white-Protestant than ethnically diverse. Four lived in residential homes; eight participants lived in self-contained bungalows at two different retirement facilities; and one woman lived in a self-contained government subsidized apartment in a retirement facility.

Specific questions regarding income status were not included in the questionnaire protocol. Previous research (Miller, 2001) demonstrated that income was not a factor in measuring life satisfaction. Participants in the present study were asked questions regarding financial management. Widow Eight expressed serious concerns regarding her future economic well-being. However, when asked if her limited finances interfered with her life satisfaction, she remarked: "No. I just know that it exists." The participants lived independently without financial assistance from children; and they wanted to make sure they did not need to rely on children for financial support. Based on their comments regarding investments, Social Security payments were not the only source of income for the majority of the women. Two women spoke of a need to conserve funds in order to

maintain current living arrangements; but the impending crisis did not interfere with their immediate adjustment to living alone.

It is important to note that, according to the Administration on Aging (2001), seventy percent of the elderly with incomes below the poverty level are women; and more than half of elderly widows living in poverty were not poor before the death of their husbands. As women grow older, their chances of falling into poverty status increase. Their primary source of income (more than three-fifths) is Social Security; and three out of four persons over the age of 65 on Supplemental Security Income (assistance to the poorest) are women (www.aoa.gov). When a husband dies, Social Security payments are severely reduced. Since the paid employment histories of most of the women were sporadic and involved lower-paying jobs, the potential for earning their own retirement pensions was unlikely. Given these trends, and since the women in the present study were widowed two to five years, it is possible that extended years of widowhood may create future financial strain.

Twelve of the participants had employment histories outside the private sphere of domestic work. The majority of the women stayed at home until their children were in grade school or after their children were in college:

They were not big fancy jobs or anything else but we had fun (Widow 1).

Just three days a week... part-time for a little extra (Widow 2).

I just enjoyed being at home and my husband said the two of us are not going to work. Either I quit or he would (Widow 4).

We had to pay tuition. I offered to work before that but he said you are worth more here at home taking care of the children (Widow 7).

I had a little part time job at times. I had stayed home to rear the girls... super mom (Widow 13).

They were traditional wives and mothers whose primary job was caring for their families and their homes.

After their children were in school, several of the women enjoyed long-term employment with a single employer. However, they still considered their jobs as something quite different from their husbands' careers. The husband's wages provided the economic security for the family, and the wife's employment outside the home provided "a little extra" money for non necessities. From a practical standpoint, the family could not maintain economic survival on the wife's wages; but they could survive on the husband's salary. Employment for the widow was defined in relationship to how her husband felt about the time she would spend away from housework and childcare.

Design and Procedure

Internal Review Board guidelines were met and approved. These included a detailed outline of interview procedures, a timeline for completion, and a revision to the recruiting procedure. Since the study participants were older women living alone, the board deemed that the initial contact with potential participants should flow through a referral process. Community contacts (support leaders who had knowledge of widowed women who fit the criterion) provided referrals. The support leaders were supplied copies of the study information sheets and a cover letter for distribution to potential participants. The cover letter assured confidentiality and guaranteed that no solicitation would follow receipt of letter. If potential participants were interested in the study, it was their responsibility to make the initial contact.

When a telephone call from a widow was received, the widow was asked to identify her referral contact and to confirm that she had received the study information

topic. These questions were tested during a practice interview with another widow before finalizing the protocol. Demographic questions preceded the protocol questions as a means of identification and putting the participant at ease. An exploratory open-ended question regarding the circumstances surrounding the death of the husband was used to help the participant in recalling some of the early adjustment themes. Research (Steeves and Kahn 1995)) has shown that retelling the story of the death of a spouse is beneficial. Subsequent questions regarding adjustment themes were used to maintain focus and assure that pertinent answers to research questions were being provided. Probes were constructed under each theme section of the questionnaire protocol in order to gather comprehensive data. The interviews were participant-driven in that the widows were allowed to control the direction of the interview. The majority of the questions were open-ended and free for participant interpretation. The participants controlled the duration of the interview. The interviews ranged from ninety minutes to two hours.

After the interviews concluded, each participant was asked if she could be called upon for additional clarification if needed. They were all willing to accommodate follow-up. The participants were mailed personal notes thanking them for their support. One widow expressed an interest in a copy of the written report.

Analysis

Analysis began during the interview process. When necessary, the respondents were guided with probing questions in order to bring clarity to the data. Following the interviews, the conversations were transcribed in full. During the transcribing process, an on-going memo procedure was in place which referenced themes of adjustment. Specific

nuances that described the participants' reactions—crying, sighs, and laughter were also noted within the transcription of the data.

After transcription was complete, three sets were copied for the analysis process. The first reading copy was used for category coding. Twenty-five codes were defined—work, children, old friends, new friends, health, activities, etc. The second set became the cut-and-paste copy. Pertinent pieces of data from each interview were literally cut out of the transcribed material and pasted onto charts. The charts were used to connect relationships and identify commonalities in the widows' interviews. A comparison of the first reading and the charted categories confirmed that all significant categories were identified. The categories were then condensed and reorganized into themes. Some categories were eliminated as unimportant to the study's purpose. After the themes for analysis were established, another literature review followed to offer explanation and opposing views to analysis.

The literature review also provided an opportunity to narrow the research focus. Categories were combined and themes of adjustment were analyzed to determine their value to the study. The following themes ultimately emerged from the data analysis: (1) a new reality, (2) getting used to me, (3) missing the wife and the husband, (4) searching for new meaning and purpose, (5) finding support, and (6) accepting loneliness. The third set of transcripts provided a clean reading for use in a final evaluation of data. Exemplary quotes were extracted from the charts and from the clean readings to support the results of the analysis.

Ethical Concerns

Since the widows were asked to feel safe in disclosing their experiences of grief as well as intimate details of their marriages, confidentiality was especially important. The women received a cover letter (see Appendix C) as well as an IRB-approved study information sheet (see Appendix D) which assured confidentiality. In order to protect the women's identities, the widows' names and the names of family members were excluded from the data. The participants are simply identified as Widow 1, 2...etc. If their husbands' names were used, they were given pseudonyms. The women displayed little concern regarding confidentiality. They appeared very comfortable in sharing their experiences.

Disclosure of unresolved grief issues and the subsequent emotional trauma that could occur was a concern. A list of support agencies (see Appendix E) in the community was prepared in advance for the purpose of providing assistance. The participants were assured of interview suspension if at any time the conversation became too painful. Many of the women became emotional and cried during the interviews. They were given the opportunity to end the interview or reschedule. The interviews were not halted; and there was a sense of relief expressed in spite of the emotional pain incurred.

Analysis and Discussion

A New Reality

When asked to explain what it was like to face the reality of living alone (all these women went directly from living with parents to marriage), the enormity of the loss was apparent in their vivid descriptions of the immediate aftermath of the husband's death.

Expressions of shock, numbness, overwhelming sadness, and intense aloneness were common adjectives used to describe first emotions. Functionality was severely limited for the majority to the women in this study:

At the funeral and stuff I was pretty much out of it...
It took me weeks to get rested (Widow 8).

I was in a fog for days. I think God does that for us. I had very few feelings
(Widow 7).

You are truly in a fog or a daze (Widow 13).

Devastating...that is the only thing I can think of. I don't think anyone realizes until it happens to them how bad it is. You don't realize when your parents are gone because you did not live with them for 50 years like you did your husband. I never realized it until it happened to me
(Widow 5).

Research (Wolfelt, 1992) has shown that, in the first stage of grief, this temporary loss of reality acts as a "psychological shock absorber" which permits the mind to catch up with the reality of death (p.46). Other research has suggested that the first stage is about adjusting to separation and accepting loss. According to Steeves (2002), the bereaved spoke about this as a period of numbness; but, in actuality, they were experiencing strong emotions: "It would be more accurate to refer to a blunted will, confused and incomplete memories, and an inability to talk clearly about the emotions during this period, a condition that might be pathologic" (p.5). Whatever the cause, the women in the present study shared a common language to describe their first grief emotions.

The widows' newfound understanding of what it meant to experience the death of a long-term partner added a new dimension to their grief. It was as if reducing the experience to an expression of words might take away from the depth of the loss—becoming a widow can only be understood in the experience itself. Widow Three described her feelings in relationship to her mother's response to becoming a widow:

I am not even sure there are words to express it. It is awful...
I watched my mother sit inside four walls for too many years doing nothing and

just deteriorating. I would go over there depending on what time of the day noon meal or evening meal and she would be eating a sandwich. And I thought...oh mother there is more to life than sandwiches. Now I understand why she did it.

Widow Four expressed the reality of widowhood as the loss of all desire to live:

"I just did not want to go on living." One month after her husband's death, she was admitted to a mental healthcare facility. Three women in this study found they could not cope without professional help. Widow Five recognized the signs of her escalating depression:

I realized it and talked to a neighbor lady who had went through the same thing and admitted myself. It took me almost a year before I begin doing more normal things and not grieving so much like I was. I went to a psychiatrist for about eight months and I got into a support group.

The death of a husband became the single most significant life stressor for nine of the women.

Four of the women also had experienced the death of children. Surviving tragedy was something they understood; and they connected their children's deaths to the grief they experienced when their husbands died. It was difficult to determine if the death of children helped with the process of grieving or if it simply provided recognition that life goes on in spite of loss. Research (Wortman and Silver, 1992) has suggested that mastery of stressful experiences in the past can reduce the impact of later stressful events. Clearly, widowhood immediately separated the women in this study from an old way of life. From their perspectives, it was a unique experience that only women who have felt the aloneness after the death of a spouse could comprehend. Widow Three described these feelings in relationship to how she felt about her own struggles: "They (married women in her church) don't understand what it is like to be alone. I hope they never do. But you try to keep active. You try to keep your life going forward."

The widows saw their adjustment to living alone as an ongoing process. It never occurred to them that the feelings of disorganization, confusion, searching, and yearning that Wolfelt (1992) established as the most frightening part of "the grief journey" were directly tied to the loss of a gendered way of life. However, the thirteen women in the present study no longer shared everyday experiences with the men who played pivotal roles in sustaining the feminine and masculine ideals embedded in the social reality of a traditional marriage.

Getting Used to Being a Widow and Being Me

The death of a husband was much more than losing a long-term companion. Determining whom they were as married women depended on whom they were in the various roles they occupied in their social environment.

Social identity. The women were unable to pinpoint the exact moment when they realized the term widow referred to them; but some recalled the first time they were required to reveal their new status on a document. This exercise became a pivotal moment in accepting a changed social identity. They could no longer check married; and they were now required to place a check in the widow box. The acceptance, although painful at first, happened quickly:

That was a hard thing for me to think about at first. I said...I am a widow. I just had never given that a thought but that is what I am so that is what I will be for the rest of my life (Widow 2).

You know when you fill out forms you have to check widow. I didn't feel very good about it for a while but I guess it doesn't bother me very much now (Widow 8).

Other people have done that for me (labeled her a widow) and I know that I am still a woman. I am a woman who happens to be a widow (Widow 9).

Accepting the legitimacy of a widowed identity was as easy as accepting the legitimacy of being married. The women accepted that checking the "widow" box was a necessary

solidified a new social identity for the widow. This new social identity was reinforced within a community of other widows:

If I go with widowed women I don't feel like a fifth wheel. I am the first one in the group to lose a spouse (Widow 1).

Well we use to go with couples a lot. You don't do that after you lose your spouse. You don't feel right and then after you've done that once or so people don't ask you again anyway (Widow 11).

Twelve women in the present study no longer shared a common social reality with people they knew before their husbands died. Although being widowed was as acceptable as being married, they did not fit the social script they had played for more than fifty years. They were no longer a couple, and they were unsure of their value without a husband.

It is difficult to determine how much of their feelings were justified by rejection or by their own uneasiness about being a widow; but there was a real sense of lost value within their social networks:

People look at you in a different way. You are not part of a couple and so people that are still couples do their thing and you are not often included. That doesn't surprise me anymore you are a widow now (Widow 2).

Oh, you are sort of on the edge, on the peripheral thing you know. You are not part of the mainstream anymore. You are a widow (Widow 8).

Having a husband clearly gave these women a sense of belonging to a particular social group that garnered more legitimate authority within their communities. In their traditional marriages, men established the cultural, political, and economic authority. Having a husband allowed the women to feel welcomed and recognized as a valued contributor. Their marriages were incorporated within a larger social system of patriarchy (institutions created and controlled by men for the purpose of maintaining cultural, political and economic power) which sustained a social order designed to support a (heterosexual) couple world.

Assignment to a new social group labeled "widow" was in many ways automatic. Although initially distressing, twelve of the widows discovered that an existing group of older women were willing to reach out and help them adjust to the loss of a husband. Letting go of their connection with the couple world was made easier by having safe association with women who shared the same social identity. Being in a network with other widows provided mutuality and acceptance. However, the more difficult challenge was coming to grips with who they were as unmarried women.

Personal identity. Personal identity is the person's perception of self. For the purposes of the present study, it is the widow's perception of her self as a female. Since meaning is created in the presence of others, self-identity is often intertwined within the dynamics of the marriage relationship. Losing a husband created an identity crisis for the widow because she had little individual identity outside the marriage:

I have always been John's wife...I haven't changed that and I am not going to change that because I am still Mrs. (Widow 1).

I think I am the same person that I have been all my married life. I don't feel any different because I am alone now. I am prepared that this is the way it will be until the day I die. I just can't feature being with anybody else...we were one (Widow 2).

I will always think of myself as Jack's wife (Widow 11).

He has been a part of me for all those years. You know how they feel without even asking them lots of times. It's something deep inside of you that you can't explain. Even though you may not agree you come to a satisfaction of understanding each other. Your children...you can see are a part of him. If you didn't have children, I think it would be easier to drop it all but you can't because of that (Widow 6).

We were friends and just did everything together. That is what made it so hard because we were so use to going with each other. We were a group of two. We were so near the same. (Widow 4).

The widows identified their perspective of self as a component of being a couple. Their identities became wrapped up in the ways in which they measured their relationship to their husbands.

The majority still thought of themselves as being married. When asked if they would consider remarriage, the women explained their feelings by connecting the explanation to their feelings about their husbands.

I have no desire to be with another man. I don't even know if I could hold hands with another man (Widow 5).

I had such deep feelings for Frank...I just couldn't imagine and I still feel the same way (Widow 2).

I am still in love with my husband. I have no desire for another man to sit in the chair here (Widow 3).

I guess I know I am single but my husband will always be a part of me (Widow 7).

The participants in the present study were struggling with detaching themselves from their married identities. This may account for their lack of interest in marriage. It is also possible that the number of years widowed played a role in their lack of interest in marriage. Seven of the women were widowed three years or less.

Three of the widows with college degrees had a better grasp of their personal identities; and they also expressed more independence in their marriage. They had interests outside of their married relationships; and they more often spent time away from husbands:

I was a wife but I was also a human being. I see myself as a woman. I just don't menstruate anymore (Widow 12).

We were good friends but we each had our own interests and we respected each other's need to do things separately. He developed interests and I developed my own (Widow 9).

Widow Nine felt that having interests outside the marriage was a positive because she knew of too many women who were "lost" when their husbands died: "In some cases they were totally dependent on the other person for almost everything. I think that feeling of dependence could be devastating if you suddenly felt like you just couldn't make it on your own."

mothers, and it was what they knew to be their job for the family. The family became the production arena for gender-specific work (West and Zimmerman, 1987) because cooking and cleaning and providing care for the children was what being a good wife and mother was all about.

They entered into marriage with a definitive division of labor already in place. They followed the same pattern used by their parents. In many ways, the motivation for getting married and remaining married was an economic and a (heterosexual) couple arrangement that fit into the social reality of their time and place in history. Her job was inside the home; and she was continually evaluated on how well she performed her job as a wife and a mother. Doing what wives do and interacting with their husbands and children allowed her to develop this identity. Domestic work became an integral part of her everyday existence in the private sphere of the home. It provided meaning and purpose to their marriages and their relationships within the family system. As an unpaid provider of multiple services under the job description of "homemaker" and "housewife," the widows in the present study met the duties and obligations of the marriage contract "in sickness and in health." Half of the widows became providers of personal care services (e.g., dressing, feeding and bathing) to husbands who could no longer manage these tasks without assistance.

Informal caregiver role. Seven women became caregivers for ailing husbands for varying degrees of time (two months and up to five years). They were forced into role adjustment while at the same time dealing with the stress of providing hands-on care to a husband whose health was deteriorating. It became necessary to take on their husbands'

various roles, such as running errands, banking, minor repairs, trash and lawn duties, and doing all the driving because of their husbands' physical limitations:

You see I had to do the lawn. I had to run all over town. He couldn't do anything (Widow 1).

You know since he wasn't well, I learned to do a lot of things before he died that I hadn't done years ago (Widow 7)

I had already been doing those things (referring to his job before his health declined). I didn't enjoy it particularly but it had to be done (Widow 8).

Most of the caregivers were grateful that they learned to do their husband's job before he died; and they generally felt they were better prepared to deal with living alone after the deaths of their husbands than other widows they knew.

Sawatzky and Fowler-Kerry (2003) found that nearly all the caregivers in their study, who had husbands in declining health, experienced a significant change in their lifestyle before their husbands' deaths. Caregiving forced choices which often led to isolation and disconnection from a community. In many cases, their husbands were unable to communicate, which led to further isolation. The women in this study spoke of the painful changes they experienced in their relationships with husbands; they missed their friendships and the social isolation caused them to feel disconnected.

The experiences of the informal caregivers gave a different meaning to their widowed experiences; they could not separate that part of their marriage from becoming widowed. Their comments reflected a sense of guilt at their inability to fulfill their caregiving responsibilities and a sense of anger over unresolved issues with their husbands:

I thought I had to be the strong person and not break down. It was hard to watch him deteriorate (Widow 2).

I was so busy caregiving that I wonder did I say often enough I love you. Did I let him know I cared? I should have said I will miss you like crazy because I love you (Widow 3).

He couldn't communicate. There were things I wanted him to say (Widow 4).

I spent my time there [healthcare facility] and so I was out of touch with everybody. He would say don't go running off from me all the time. Could I have done something different...something better? He blamed me. I was the cause (Widow 6).

This segment of the interview was very emotional. When widow Eight was asked to explain why she felt anger toward her husband she stated: "I don't want to go there."

Widow Thirteen also became emotionally distraught and asked to change the line of questioning: "You took me to a place where I have not been for a long time." Even five years after the husband's death, the intense psychological scars, which resulted from issues surrounding caregiving, were too distressful for discussion.

Van den Hoonaard (2001) discovered that being a widow is partially defined by the care husbands required prior to death as well as anger at hospitals and doctors for incorrect diagnoses or inadequate care. Although the widows in her study recognized their husbands' were dying, they were shocked when death occurred. The loss of the spouse was in itself not as disruptive as what was missing in their lives. They missed the meaning and purpose his illness gave to their everyday activities. Understanding the social and psychological challenges facing a growing number of informal caregivers is critical to life satisfaction after the death of a husband.

Approximately seventy-five percent of those providing care to older family members are women; and sixty-five percent of the women are sixty-five and over who provide care to their husbands (www.aoa.gov). The caregiving role is a social expectation that follows women throughout their life span. Research (Brewer, 2001) has demonstrated that women generally feel that the burden of caregiving falls on their shoulders. This work is uncompensated and often results in high levels of stress, fatigue, financial hardship, exhaustion, isolation, and loneliness. Painful emotions such as guilt,

anger, and grief add to the burden of care; and, in many cases, the caregivers' health deteriorates as a result of stress and exhaustion (Brewer, 2001).

If there was resentment felt by the widows in the present study, it was not reflected in their dialogue. They wanted to keep their husbands out of nursing homes as long as possible even if providing care took a toll on their own physical and emotional well-being: "I thought I had to be the strong person and not break down" (Widow 2). Being a good wife meant taking care of their husbands in sickness and in health for the duration of the marriage: "And suddenly I didn't have that and I was free in a way and also it was awfully quiet. You miss them and the other part is freer but I was lost" (Widow 13). Widow Thirteen also spoke of how she took a timer with her when she ran errands or went for a walk because she knew that she could not leave her husband for an extended period of time. It was difficult for her to change the habit of setting the timer. Losing the activity involved in caregiving was especially difficult because they had given up virtually all other activities to handle the husband's care.

The husband's role. The husband's role was very much in keeping with their father's role in the family. Their job in the marriage was clearly defined by what it meant to work outside the home in the public sphere. They were the economic providers, expected to financially support the family by exchanging their services for pay. They did what men were supposed to do around the home—they were car and equipment mechanics, electricians, plumbers, carpenters, and ran errands for their wives after retirement:

Making sure the mower tractor was running...changing the oil (Widow 3).

He took care of gardening, oil and stuff (Widow 6).

He was real good about knowing how to fix things in the house. I miss that about him because if something went wrong he knew how to fix it usually (Widow 4).

He always saw to it that everything around the house worked. He would always tell me what he was doing but I didn't always understand because I am just not mechanically inclined like he was (Widow 9).

I don't know how to pump gas. My husband always pumped the gas. So there is this gas station that pumps your gas so every time I need gas that is where I go (Widow 11).

The role of the husband rarely crossed the boundaries drawn between the private sphere and the public sphere. He did not interfere with her work inside the home; and she accepted that his work around the house was the kind of work men do best.

Losing husband's role. Unless health interfered with their ability to drive, husbands did most of the driving and handled most of the car maintenance. Husbands were chauffeurs and traveling companions:

Doing all the driving was one thing he did. I don't like to travel alone and it is getting worse every year. I don't like driving all the time. I realize now being in the driver's seat that you don't get to see all this stuff...I realize he didn't get to see what is going on (Widow 12).

During the day I don't mind driving as long as it is around here. I wasn't even going to renew my drivers license cause I was never driving...it's a good thing I did (Widow 2).

Finding someone to replace the husband's role as a traveling companion has not been easy. Other widows have substituted; but their widowed friends are just as apprehensive about traveling, especially during the winter months. Driving and traveling distances has been reduced significantly for the oldest of widows, creating isolation that did not exist when their husbands were living. During their marriage, they rarely took trips without their husbands. It was something they felt uncomfortable doing: "I know people who have done that and that is their business but I just can't imagine taking a vacation without him as long as he was here" (Widow 3). For this cohort of women, activities in the public sphere were commonly carried out in the company of their husbands or with others.

Half of the women in this study handled the family bookkeeping for most of their married life. The more tasks they shared in the division of labor within the marriage, the more confident they felt in their ability to cope with living alone. For others, taking on this role was an overwhelming task:

I was absolutely lost. The children had said dad ought to explain what he is doing with these bills and the insurance. He would show me once and that was the end of it. I should have kept after him but I didn't. It was a very hard struggle to remember and I finally wrote down on paper if I am paying a bill... (Widow 2).

Learning to balance the checkbook and pay the bills was not unduly stressful for most of the women. However, they missed their husband's advice regarding purchasing decisions, such as shopping for a new car or other major home purchases.

Some were especially concerned with their ability to make wise decisions regarding financial investments: "He just had an investment sense which I don't have and I am floundering. I miss that even though I was ready in many ways" (Widow 13). They often relied on children for advice:

My daughter is my financial expert now (Widow 4).

I let my son invest and he usually checks to see if I have something due and I let him know if there is something that needs to be reinvested (Widow 10).

While children adopted some variations of the husband's role, the women made every effort to learn their husband's job. This was an important step in their successful transition to living alone.

Losing the wife's role. The most significant role adjustment was reflected in the everyday activities that were directly connected to the widow's role in the marriage. When ask to talk about how their daily routines have changed, their experiences were universal. For example, many of them discussed a changed relationship to food and cooking:

I do not think it is worth my time to prepare a meal just for me. He is not here anymore. He was the one I was doing things for and after he was gone I missed that so I thought it's not worth cooking for my own need (Widow 2).

You don't even want to eat. I eat because I am a diabetic and I have to eat. I don't want to cook anymore (Widow 1).

You don't feel like cooking for one person (Widow 3).

I am not one that likes to cook but I always cooked good meals and things for the family (Widow 5).

I enjoyed cooking when there was somebody to share it with me. I don't enjoy it anymore (Widow 9).

The enjoyment they had found in the wifely job was in doing it for someone else.

Adjusting to eating alone was more difficult than giving up cooking. Their husbands were eating companions and eating was an activity they shared everyday. Many of the women no longer ate at the dining table where they used to sit with their husbands:

Are you kidding? I haven't sat at that table. I won't. Why should I? There is nobody there (Widow 6).

I use a TV tray to eat off of and I keep all this other stuff on my table now (Widow 3).

They ate in front of the TV because "it keeps them company" (Widow 6). They felt uncomfortable eating in a restaurant alone; but they have eaten at fast food restaurants:

I don't enjoy being in a restaurant by myself. I have already if I am out and I am hungry and it is time to eat. I have a few times stopped to eat but not just to go out to eat by myself... (Widow 8).

I would feel out of place. I just feel like I have to be with somebody. I don't want to do that all alone. I don't know if that is just because...for me I just feel like I was forever with my husband. The only place I go alone is Burger King (Widow 2).

One widow talked about how she had to force herself to go out to eat:

It's something that I have decided if I want to go out and eat and there is no one else around, I have to do it myself. I more or less have forced myself to do that and after I have done it a couple of times I find it isn't that bad really because there are other single people or people eating alone (Widow 5).

Finding someone to share a meal was an important step in adjusting to living alone. The children often invited them over for meals or took them out; but they expressed a desire to have someone other than family to fill the husband's role as eating companion.

Since their job involved providing a service to their husband, his death terminated the need for her services. They certainly experienced a decrease in domestic work when their children left home; but there was a continuance of the same activity on a smaller scale. When he died, they no longer had anyone to affirm their value as a wife:

You don't have to worry about a meal. You don't have to worry about clothing. You don't have to worry about pleasing anybody (Widow 3).

I kind of have my routine that I have had for years and years. But I have learned that I don't have to keep everything spic and span...I don't clean like I use to (Widow 5).

You just do your own thing and nobody is going to tell you what to do (Widow 12).

I don't have to be responsible to anybody (Widow 10).

I am my own boss. My husband wasn't bossy. He was kind but you know please the other partner (Widow 7).

After spending an average of fifty-two years in a relationship, which was often based on pleasing their husbands, the women in the present study found widowhood offered a freedom they did not have as married women.

Although they were now free from the duties and obligations of marriage, this new independence was inadequate compensation for what they had lost. They had been socialized to view marriage as the normal enduring framework for their entire adult life. They believed that their marriage had produced more benefits than disadvantages. They had spent a lifetime maintaining a social bond with the same partner. Marriage was not just about the relationship; it was also about an achievement. They had lost the most important social resource (husband) in their life. After their husbands' deaths, the

widows were faced with relying on others to fill roles their husbands had filled in their marriages.

Finding Support

The support the women received from their families and their social network of friends and acquaintances was essential to dealing with the early stages of grief. Although the degree of support varied with each participant, the support received from friends and family was a key factor in their adjustment process.

Children. The widows' children played a significant supporting role immediately following the death. The funeral rituals and the paperwork involved in declaring death created an overload of stress which virtually halted functionality. The children took charge of funeral arrangements, handled insurance and social security details, and visited or telephoned frequently during the first few weeks after the death:

It was beautiful the way everything went but that is my family (Widow 7).

Every couple of days for the first few weeks, the one on the East coast was calling (Widow 3).

Well I think they check on me more. They didn't use to do that. My daughter (lives out of state) e-mails me back and forth all the time (Widow 11).

They seem more protective of me. Losing a parent evidently hit them pretty hard. I have been pampered like you wouldn't believe (Widow 9).

The family was all very supportive and the grandchildren I think at the time were all here in town (Widow 10).

If the husband was incapacitated before his death, the children were involved in healthcare decisions; and in some cases, they had shared in the care of an ailing father:

My youngest daughter would come and help. We had home health coming in for baths. She would come in once a week and do it. She would stay with him on Sundays so I could go to church (Widow 8).

The daughters were more involved in helping with domestic work such as housecleaning and caregiving. Sons and sons-in-law were more likely to provide

instrumental support (sharing meals, servicing car, home repairs, etc.) while daughters were more likely to offer emotional support (conversations regarding loneliness). Daughters-in-law were mentioned in context with sons—such as having her over for meals. Widows with strong ties to children before the death of their husbands found these relationships even more meaningful after the death of the husband. A weak relationship before the death did not necessarily become a stronger relationship as a result of the death.

Research has been mixed on the significance of children's support. Lopata (1979) found slight increases in interactions with children during the first year of widowhood. The interactions returned to prewidowhood frequency after the first year, and in some cases, fell even lower. Lopata found that children contribute to joint celebrations of holidays and other special event activities. However, all children were not equally involved. Daughters tended to be more involved, and in particular provided more emotional support. Anderson (1984) discovered that older widowed women were more likely to cultivate kinship ties with children after the death of a spouse. However, the children of the widows he interviewed reported little change in their ties with mothers after the death of fathers. Widows in Anderson's study were just as likely to seek out ties with sons as they were daughters, especially when worried or depressed. It is possible that the widows' closer relationships with daughters in the present study were nurtured before the death of husbands and just continued after the death. Regardless of the quality of the relationships, these participants expressed a strong desire to spend more time with their children; however, they did not want to appear too needy.

In some cases, the widows found it necessary to renegotiate their relationship with children in order to retain independence:

I don't know how to say it. The younger one and his wife decided that I am five years old. Role reversal you know... (Widow 1).

I want to be a little independent. I want to do for myself (Widow 2).

I don't know why for some reason they think a woman alone can't do things, but anyway I was glad they cared (Widow 3).

I think before they just assumed that dad and I were looking after each other. Now if they don't look after me who is going to...that is the feeling I get (Widow 9).

When widow One was asked if her children would have treated her husband in the same manner if she had died first, she replied emphatically: "Absolutely not." Since the traditional authority in the family was normally abdicated to the husband, the children may have felt their mother's ability to manage her own life without the assistance of a male counterpart was questionable. The women in the present study saw their children's involvement as overprotectiveness. Though the widow may have been willing to submit to the wishes of a husband, they were not as eager to do the same for the children. The hierarchal arrangement of the family placed her authority above the children. This changing dynamic was worrisome. Not only did it signal growing older and losing functionality, it represented losing her place of value in the family. She would no longer be able to contribute.

The widows recognized that at some point they may need to relinquish more control to children. The majority had already provided power of attorney to adult children. They were well aware that declining health could result in a loss of power within the family unit:

I have told my daughter I want to be independent as long as I can be. She respects that totally and lets me do what I want to do but she is always there in case I need help on anything. I really appreciate her attitude because I know that is not always true (Widow 9).

I know some people whose children do that and I guess I wouldn't appreciate it but I hope I am open enough to listen if they give me some suggestions or advice... (Widow 8).

They spoke about the day when they may be forced to give up driving; and they were aware of the limitations of declining health. The greater concern was being a burden to the children. This was a common theme throughout their conversations.

Several of the women shared stories of how they had been full-time caregivers to aged and ailing parents. They saw the lives of their children as very busy; and they did not want their children to become mother's caregiver:

I don't want to disrupt their families because they all have so much stuff going on (Widow 11).

I was relied on so heavily when my mother was alive so I just made up my mind that I was never going to be a burden to them (Widow 3).

I don't want to put anybody out. I don't want anyone to bother with me. But that is just how I am. I don't want to be a burden to anybody (Widow 2).

But I hope I don't get sick so I don't have to rely on my children. I hope I can just drop over some day and that is the end so they don't have to take care of me (Widow 7).

They had experienced the burdens of caregiving; and they did not want their children to go through that experience. It was something children were not supposed to do—they were to be nurtured.

A reliance on children meant the mother had to become the child. As widow One expressed, "role reversal" with children is not normal. Research (van den Hoonaard, 2001) has shown that most widows are cognizant of the need for adult children to have their own personal space free from the lives of their mothers. However, widows want to be treated like competent adults without feeling abandoned by the children. Van den Hoonaard (2001) expressed these concerns when she wrote: "Thus, we see a balancing act that goes on between an older widow and her children. This may be a more important issue for sons, and several women commented that daughters feel a stronger tie to their mother than sons do" (p.61). Managing on their own was a small way that the women in

this study felt they contributed to helping their children manage their busy lives. Remaining independent also allowed the widows to feel in control of their own destiny. Getting along without too much help from their children meant they were capable of living alone and being alone.

Other family members. During the interviews, grandchildren were mentioned more often than other family members were. However, the frequency of interactions (visits or telephone calls) with grandchildren was minimal. When they did have opportunity to interact, it was a great source of enjoyment. Sharing in the grandchildren's achievements was important; and whenever they could attend special events involving grandchildren, they welcomed the invitations. Grandchildren did not call or visit often; but, again, the women recognized that their grandchildren (like their parents) were busy with their own lives.

All of the women had experienced the death of siblings. The support from siblings was minimal. Sisters were mentioned more often than were brothers. Married sisters were less likely than widowed sisters to spend time together. Widow Seven spoke of how she would probably spend more time with her sister since she had just recently been widowed herself: "She is five years younger than I am and I left home and got married quite a while before she did. So we were never quite that close...so this [husbands deaths] has pulled us together." The women spoke of siblings who were experiencing serious health issues and in some cases confined to nursing homes. Research (Anderson 1984) has revealed that older widows want to cultivate relationships with siblings after the death of a spouse. However, the unique circumstances of the

siblings' individual situations and their own spouses' health may impact the support siblings can provide late in life.

Support Groups. Formal support groups were widely available after the death of their husbands. This group spoke of services provided by funeral homes, Hospice, the AARP, churches, and local organizations specializing in elder care. They were either contacted or provided with information regarding availability of meetings after their husbands died. Five women decided to join a support group; two women were considering it. The five who participated found other widows in the group validated their emotional experiences while becoming a resource for instrumental help. Widow Thirteen explained the benefits of support groups this way: "I went there to talk. All the people were widowed. Every time you were with the group you learn something every time. I had gotten a new car and yeah going to get license plates and the registration was all new. I could get help from all of them."

Muller and Thompson's (2003) research substantiated that having a sympathetic listener was essential to adjustment. However, Stewart, Craig, MacPherson, and Alexander (2001) found that people attending self-help groups used these sharing sessions for much more than talking about grief. The support meetings became formats for discussing coping strategies, meeting new people, engaging in social activities, and forming new friendships. They also provided a safe environment which permitted participants to gain hope, improve skills in developing social relationships, learn new role definitions, and help reduce loneliness. The women in this study, who attended weekly meetings for extended periods of time, felt this was a positive step to effectively coping with life reconstruction after the death of a husband.

Couple Friends. When their husbands died, couple friends were not a significant resource of support for most of the participants. The loss of these friendships may have resulted because the widows were struggling with how to renegotiate these relationships:

I feel so out of place. There are other couples here and there all over and I don't have a husband (Widow 2).

I feel left out. I feel it because we were always in that type of group and now you are not (Widow 6).

Well even with people you have known for years and years. You're the oddball (Widow 1).

I felt like a fifth wheel. I just didn't feel right and then after you have done that once or so people don't ask you again anyway (Widow 11).

Elizabeth Bankoff (1983) discovered in her research that widows tend to withdraw from reality during the early stage of bereavement. It is in this early stage that widows may be unresponsive to social support. Couple friends may be shut out by the widow because they lack an understanding of her need to temporarily withdraw.

It is also possible that couple friends of the widows shared the responsibility for the lost connection. They may have felt just as uncomfortable in dealing with a friend who had always been accompanied by a husband during social gatherings:

The one couple (long-term relationship) hasn't even called me or come to see me since he has been gone (Widow 5).

We use to do things as couples. That doesn't happen much anymore which doesn't surprise me. You are a widow now (Widow 8).

At first some couples invited me out or had me in their homes but that is not the case now (Widow 12).

Being alone in a social world that celebrates, promotes, and accommodates heterosexual couples was a difficult adjustment: "They don't set tables for five" (Widow 3).

To understand why the loss of couple friends has been a common theme in widowhood research, it is important to understand how this experience fits into a larger social context.

Van den Hoonaard (2001) suggested that the lack of clear norms makes it difficult for widows and their couple friends to sustain their relationships after a death of husbands. Widows in her research had spent the majority of their married lives socializing with other married couples. The majority had few friendships outside of a social network comprised of couples; and, as couples, they had shared the same culture, the same language, and the same set of meaning structures from the past and present. The widows in the present study expressed similar feelings about their couple friends; and they felt their experiences as single women were disconnected from the couple world.

Feminist theorist Chrys Ingraham (1996) argued that it is heterosexual celebrations and traditions (e.g., weddings, anniversaries, bridal showers, Valentine's Day) that maintain social expectations that favor heterosexual arrangements. These material conditions or traditions favor heterosexual couples economically, politically, and socially. More importantly, as an elaborate marketing system, these celebrations and traditions privilege men as a group and exploit women as a group. They also perpetuate male privilege within societies and sanction the social partnership between a man and a woman. Ingraham referred to this as "heterosexual imaginary" or "that way of thinking which conceals the operation of heterosexuality in structuring gender and closes off any critical analysis of heterosexuality as an organizing institution" (p.169). The couple activities of the women in the present study was constantly reinforced by a social value system which is sanctioned by religion, promoted in every form of media, and manipulated by a capitalistic economy in order to make a profit. Their married lives

reflected conformity to social behavior that celebrated and promoted couple arrangements as the normal and preferred way of interacting with others.

Just as gender organized their relationships with husbands and others, heterosexuality organized almost every aspect of their lives. Their social reality was centered on the assumption that to belong to a couple world, you joined as opposites—a man and a woman. The widows in the present study felt out of place when they were with other couples; and they were unsure of how to play their new role:

When I am with them, they are talking about what they [husband and wife] have done together. They have gone here or there or seen this or done that and I can't do that anymore. So it's just a difference (Widow 1).

I go for coffee with them and you can feel all the husbands and wives are talking about things they have done. And so the little clicks of people who have known each other all their lives and you don't fit in there (Widow 13).

Without a husband, the widows felt their experiences as single women were incompatible to the experiences of couples. Having a male companion made it easier; however, finding a male friend was a complicated task.

Male Friends. Friendships with men were almost non-existent in the lives of most women in this study. Widow Five was the only participant currently spending time with a male friend. Their relationship was based on the desire to "go out to eat" together or a desire to have a companion for attending special event activities. She enjoyed his company; but she was not interested in marriage. Widow One had been in a relationship with a high school friend for about six months before his death. He wanted marriage, but her children did not want her to remarry. Widow Three spoke of befriending a male friend after the death of his wife, but he wanted more than companionship: "I am not ready for that. All I wanted was a friendship just to be your friend to tell you I understand you." Widow Thirteen found a male companion through an Internet dating

service, but she chose to end the relationship: "He kept making derogatory remarks and I thought I don't deserve this. He treated me in a way my husband never did...the things he said." She was open to remarriage and wanted to find a male companion to spend time with. However, having a new man in her life was not essential to her well-being: "It is something I do not dwell on."

Older women may find it difficult to interact with men after many years of marriage. Van den Hoonaard (2001) argued that widows who were married for many years no longer know the rules of dating. Older widows do not know how to interpret approaches from men; and they may ignore or flee from the advances of men. Being with another man may feel unnatural and often there is guilt, which leads to an uncomfortable feeling:

I don't know if I could ever hold hands with another man in public (Widow 5).

I have no desire to check somebody else out like when I was a teenager (Widow 2).

There was skepticism regarding the motives of a male's attention: "One of my widow friends told me that all men are looking for is a nurse with a purse" (Widow 13). The complexities involved in negotiating dating practices late in life are multifaceted.

Research has been mixed regarding older women's desire for remarriage. Talbott (1998) found that older women exhibited much diversity in their attitudes towards men and remarriage. She concluded that the benefits of marriage in old age are far less for women than for men causing older women to be less desirous of remarriage. Widow Four expressed her concerns about remarriage: "I don't want them to be my caregiver and I don't want to be their caregiver." Accepting the traditional role in the marriage also meant accepting an unequal division of labor within the home. Although the husbands

were retired, the majority did not equally share the household chores. The participants had no interest in becoming the caregiver for another husband, and learning how to construct a relationship that fit into what they wanted from male companionship was too complicated. Dating was a social reality they no longer understood.

Bulcroft and O'Connor (1986) found that dating relationships for older persons (the majority of the respondents were widowed) provide an emotional and sexual outlet for men and women that cannot be offered by other members in their social networks. They argued that older women derive increased self identity, esteem from peers, and increased status from dating, while older men found dating an outlet for self-disclosure. Men found it easier to share their innermost feelings with women; but women reported friendships with other women as a more important outlet for self-disclosure. Most of the respondents (men and women) reported they dated for purposes of remarriage; but, in reality, most do not choose to marry the dating partner for a variety of reasons. Most cited the need for romantic love as a prerequisite for marriage, but the ability to meet the romantic ideal was difficult later in life. Companionship was also a motivating factor for dating, especially in terms of recreational activities. Needing a monogamous commitment, a confidant, and a sexual partner were reported as contributing reasons for maintaining a dating relationship. However, romance and sex were described much differently than traditionally defined at earlier stages in the life course. They were "icing on the cake," but not essential to the dating relationship. The companionate role was more highly valued than the role of romantic-sexual partner.

Since the companionate role was identified as providing more value to the dating motivation for older widows, the effects of aging on sexuality and body image may be a

contributing factor in the a remarriage decision. It is also possible that the short duration of widowhood for the women in the present study may account for some of the participants' lack of interest in pursuing male companionship. The two women who felt dating was important had been widowed for five years. However, relationships with other widows were significant to the majority of the women in the present study.

Other widows. Other widows played a greater role in helping the women cope with living alone; and interactions with widowed friends supported a new social reality that felt more comfortable than being with couple friends. Twelve women in this study were befriended by older women who "knew how it feels to lose a husband" (Widow 2). Widow Three was the only participant who took issue with the significance of nurturing relationships with other widows: "I don't want to sit and just commiserate. I don't want this poor woe is me mentality and sometimes that is what happens when you get with people whose spouses are gone, especially if they died."

However, the majority found these relationships important because they offered a sense of well-being that was not found with their married friends. Most of these new widowed friends were women who attended the same church or women from support groups. Widow Two expressed sentiments regarding friendships with other widows when she said: "I just feel like we all have something in common. We all have our feelings and we are alone and we appreciate being together." As soon as their husbands died, there appeared to be an immediate recognition of other women who shared similar experiences:

I feel at ease with them because there are so many of us now (Widow 2).

There are so many widows in our church it is unbelievable (Widow 7).

I go to so many funerals. It's more natural for me at this old age to be alone and to have lost a husband. There are so many others like me (Widow 12).

The women shared a reciprocal relationship in that they mutually benefited from the support:

But I feel like I can help her by just calling and talking or maybe going some place together (Widow 2).

I have invited them (referring to widows) here for brunch at different times. We talk about our husbands but the last time we just talked about other things. We move on. They are still in our memory. They never leave us but we move on (Widow 7).

Spending time with other widows helped them to understand that adjusting to living alone was a learned process which required time:

It took a little while to realize that he wasn't there. I would set two places (at the dinner table) you know not thinking...the same way with the bed (Widow 12).

It is something I had to learn... (Widow 7)

I am getting so I don't mind it quite like I did at first. I guess you learn that they are not going to be there (Widow 5).

Research (Bankoff, 1983) has shown that when widows move into a stage of reorganizing and rebuilding a life as women living alone they seek out people who can satisfy emotional and social needs.

It is in this final stage of finding people to satisfy needs that the women in the present study discovered meaning and purpose for their new social reality. In a sense, it became a self-evaluation of why they were left behind to carry on without their husbands. Wolfelt described it as, "The awareness that you do not get over grief, instead, you have a new reality, meaning, and purpose in your life" (p.99). The widows were experiencing varying degrees of satisfaction with their new social reality. Marriage was no longer the primary focus in their lives; and the majority expressed a desire to move on with building a meaningful life without a husband.

Discovering New Meaning and Purpose

It was the social meaning given to being a good wife that provided a reason for the marriage and for the role assignment within the marriage. It defined them as women; and it gave purpose to daily tasks which were gender-specific in the division of labor within the partnership. Losing the wife role for the women in the present study meant that they had to find meaningful work which gave them satisfaction and a sense of well-being. For twelve of the women, they found what they needed in the same areas of their lives that had always supported their social reality.

Religion and spirituality. The church played multiple roles in providing meaning and purpose for twelve of the women in this study. The church was a place where widows could find other women who understood what they were going through. The only negative regarding religious affiliation occurred in the early stages of grief work. They described their feelings in relationship to missing their husbands' presence:

Well it was very different. I sat in the same seat. A few Sundays another lady came in and sat with me but now I just sit there alone. There are many others like me so having other people like you makes it easier for you to go back (Widow 13).

And oh going to church he was on my right side. And the first time I went to church, I just couldn't hardly take it. I felt he had to be at my side and he just wasn't there (Widow 2).

You go in and you don't know who you are going to sit with. But it really doesn't bother...well I guess it still bothers me some but I have adjusted to that (Widow 8).

For the majority of the widows, church attendance was an activity they had shared with their husbands for all their married lives.

The women who had taken on a caregiver role for their ailing husbands found it even more difficult to get involved in activities outside of worship services. They had for practical purposes given up all social functions to provide round-the-clock care. Having another widow as a companion to attend special events was helpful; but they still had to

rebuild relationships after months and even years of absence from social activities. The church clearly was a place where twelve of the participants found meaning and purpose connected to a community of other believers.

When asked to explain how their faith helped them adjust to living alone, they saw their life and their husband's death as part of God's plan:

This is the way God designed my life. This is the way it was to be and I just accept it as part of his plan (Widow 3).

The Lord is my Savior and I am going to be with him (husband). I knew where he was. I didn't have to wonder...I don't think I grieved quite as long because I knew he was in a better place (Widow 1).

There were some times that were bad but I think because of my faith and I know where he is at I will see him again and it isn't like I watched him suffer (Widow 11).

In their own understanding of spirituality, God provided them with many of the things that their husbands provided as marriage partners:

I feel like he (God) is my protector...now he (husband) is not here so I depend on God to guide me and direct me (Widow 2).

I think I was alone the first night except my Lord was with me and that was the comfort I had. I really believe in God. I think when you have a husband you lean on him a lot for things and when you are alone there is only God to lean on (Widow 7).

I was aware that there is assurance that no matter what happens there is this place you can softly fall that God loves us and he is going to always be there for me (Widow 9).

I definitely felt a presence around me, especially at the time of the funeral. There was just support somewhere. It is unexplainable (Widow 12).

I have no partner if you will but I am not alone in many ways. Of course God is always with me and I rely on that heavily (Widow 3).

Having another intimate relationship, albeit spiritual, to replace the husband's role in the marriage was an important coping strategy for the widows.

God was the author of their reality. His authority (the Bible identifies God as a male-gendered deity) in their lives was based on a belief that God is the creator of all that exists in heaven and on earth. Traditionally conservative religions (those which take a more literal view of the Bible) have clearly defined a woman's role as one that submits

graciously to her husband's authority in the family and serves as his helper. Woman was made after man, of man, and for man. The reward for serving and worshiping God is having his spiritual presence, wisdom, strength, and love during life's most difficult times. Just as they had relied on their husband's presence, wisdom, strength, and love over the course of their married life, they now relied on God to supply all their needs. God represented the completion of the heterosexual image because he was the opposite of what she was supposed to be in the relationship.

When asked specifically what gives their life meaning, three women once again mentioned God:

Living a life so that I will meet him (husband) again. Living a life towards eternity. Heaven is my goal (Widow 1).

I think the most important thing is having faith in God (Widow 7).

Knowing that I have a higher power to help me with decisions in any way and friends and family that I can depend on (Widow 9).

Some of the widows believed that God had also given them a new purpose:

To serve others...to do things for the church (Widow 1).

If I didn't have the Lord and the church and friends, I would be a very sorry person because they mean a lot to me. I think I have become more compassionate with other people because I lost two children (Widow 10).

Doing things for others (Widow 7).

Whereas when I am ministering, I am ministering to people touching base with people from my experiences whether it is from losing a child or whether is losing a husband (Widow 3).

For twelve women in the present study, religion served as a frame of reference to help them define themselves. They could participate in gender-specific activities (e.g., cooking, sewing, caregiving) with others who shared the same values and beliefs. The church was the organizing agent for social events which were safe and comfortable. In the environment of the church, they could remain blended with other couples. The

church was also a place of paid employment for two of the women in the study; and it was a resource for participation in volunteer work.

Other research has shown that spirituality is a positive contributing factor to the bereavement process. Walsh, King, Jones, Tookman, and Blizard (2002) concluded that widows with strong spiritual beliefs recovered in a linear fashion with little regression as time passed. Those with low spiritual beliefs showed little change in nine months after the death of a husband. Widows with no spiritual beliefs showed a temporary gain in nine months, but their symptoms of grief intensified later on. In the present study, widow Five was the only participant who never attended church during the course of her marriage. She was invited to go with friends after the death of her husband. She attended once but never went back. She said she did not feel "comfortable." Whereas the other widows expressed religious dialogue throughout their interviews, widow Five never mentioned God. It is possible that a religious structure must be in place before the death of a husband in order to be beneficial in the adjustment process.

Children and grandchildren. Clearly, the women felt that their immediate families provided the most important human source of meaning and purpose. Their children were an affirmation of whom they were as women; they were a significant reason for marriage; and interactions with children and grandchildren provided a connection to the past and future:

As long as I have the children behind me that is very important and I feel like they love me (Widow 6).

I felt that I still have an important part to play in my children's lives (Widow 9).

I will have more great grandchildren and see the rest of the grandchildren graduate and hopefully go to college (Widow 5).

My children and my grandchildren are important to me and they like to do things with me (Widow 2).

renewed involvement difficult after the death. Widow Thirteen was the only informal caregiver who became more involved with church and secular volunteer work after her husband died. Volunteering allowed her to remain useful; and it helped her get reconnected to the community after the death of her husband. She felt this was an important step to coping with living alone. Regardless of the varying degrees of well-being, all the widows continued to miss the daily presence of their husbands.

Accepting Loneliness

In investigating the appropriateness of a loneliness measurement scale as a tool for understanding loneliness in older people, Van Baarsen, Snijders, Smit and Van Duijn (2001) concluded that loneliness is bidimensional. Referring to a theory developed by Weiss (1973), they concluded that there are two types of loneliness: loneliness through social isolation and loneliness through emotional isolation. It is the latter that referred to an absence of a reliable attachment figure, such as a partner. Weiss stressed that absence or loss of an attachment figure can only be replaced by another close and intimate bond. He argued that other supportive friendships cannot compensate for the loss. The widows in the present study certainly confirmed this finding. Although the majority of the participants had regular contact with family and friends, living with daily loneliness was their greatest obstacle to their successful adjustment to widowhood.

Living alone. The women had community connections that filled the void of social loneliness. The majority adjusted to the tasks required of a person who lives alone, and they expressed no desire to live with children:

I would not want to have somebody all the time even a lady you know. I don't mind sitting here all by myself anymore (Widow 2).

I don't mind being the only person living in this place as long as I can have contact by phone or e-mail or whatever with others when I need to or want to or they want to (Widow 9).

Widow One allowed her grandson to live with her for about eight months after her husband died: "I couldn't take the commotion, the noise, the music, the boys in and out to play games till midnight. It was too much...too much excitement."

Being alone. The participants saw living alone as something they had to adjust to or learn how to do. Living alone was acceptable; but it was a feeling of intense loneliness that haunted their successful transition to being alone. Talking about their loneliness was the most emotionally draining time during the interview. When asked to define what loneliness meant to them, their responses were universal in that they missed the intimate bond which developed over the span of their marriages:

Just having him around and having someone to talk to and of course we enjoyed the same things. We grew up together. There is nobody there (Widow 1).

Well, so often there are things I want to tell him. I spilled everything to him. I talked more to him of things that were going on and how I felt than he did to me and I think that is why I miss him. We always went together (Widow 2).

I am not even sure I have the words to express it. It is awful...the little things you miss. He was very affectionate in letting me know how he felt about me and it wasn't just his presence. It was what he did. The loneliness is awful (Widow 3).

It is about telling him about little things that come up. Something will come up like little things I want to tell him and he is not there. I don't really think of him as gone (Widow 4).

Just the knowing they are there. The touching because like I say we would touch each other in passing if we were like going through the kitchen or something you would touch each other. You really miss that (Widow 5).

Not having someone around. Not having someone to communicate with. Not having someone to share your joys and your sorrows (Widow 6).

You had someone you could depend on. When you spend forty-six years with a person you don't have that person to look to for support and love that you had over those times (Widow 8).

I need to have somebody I could always talk to and would always listen or who would talk to me (Widow 9).

Somebody to talk to...somebody to touch (Widow 12).

They absolutely believed that no other person could make them feel the same way their husbands had made them feel.

Skolnick (1991) argued that the longevity phenomenon of the twentieth century has created this loneliness dilemma for the elderly. Changes in mortality have encouraged stronger emotional bonds because couples have the potential for more years of shared partnership than any other time in our history. Because the occurrence of early death is not as frequent as it was during the nineteenth century, the elderly have little precedent for dealing with death. The psychological impact of this longevity revolution has forced many into social situations where cultural scripts have not yet been written (Skolnick 1991). The meanings that come with later life stages (such as widowhood) are too often left unsettled and confusing. For the women in the present study, the longevity of their marriages provided them with an emotional intimacy that was unique to their relationships with husbands.

When I asked them to tell me what intimacy meant, they clearly saw it as a non-sexual act:

Just to have somebody come up and put their arms around you (Widow 1).

I miss him for I can't touch him (Widow 2).

Just lay in bed and cuddle up. I just can't envision another man and being that way (Widow 4).

I miss the closeness of holding him (Widow 7).

A lot of time when we would go to bed we would just hold each other and hug and stuff and that part I miss. My dog gets lots of hugs and kisses (Widow 11).

This intimacy or emotional bond was something they felt was impossible to achieve with another person:

I have to accept it and go on from there and get out and get my mind going on other things. I think dwelling on other people and caring for them. Whether it is a man or a woman and loving them not as a sexual love but loving them as a person (Widow 6).

I still have days where I think about him and miss him so much but I think it gets easier. It doesn't ever go away the hurt doesn't ever completely go away but it gets easier (Widow 11).

I know that if I would really want to I would be free to. Ethically, I am free to do that [have another relationship with a man]...the type of relationship that I had before a very intimate kind of a relationship. I am content with being a single woman. At this point I much prefer that to the idea of making a major change (Widow 9).

When asked if a relationship with another woman could help with the loneliness, the majority did not think a female friend would be an adequate substitute for the kind of intimacy a man (more importantly, their husbands) could offer:

John always made me feel special (Widow 1).

Well not the way a husband can but under the circumstances that is enough (Widow 2).

I don't think I can explain it. It just seems like just having a man there and doing a few things with him is different than being with a woman (Widow 5).

I think the smile and the approval. I think because of the opposite sex and he gives a smile or approval it means more to you...although I appreciate a woman's smile and we hug each other. Well we are not Lesbians. I think a Lesbian you could do that. But we are not made that way (Widow 6).

I suppose a woman can do it too. Maybe I am the problem. I don't know (Widow 13).

They missed the little things that made them feel special. Yet, when they were asked if a woman could make them feel special, the question of what that meant in terms of their own sexual orientation was pondered. Understanding their feelings about sexuality and how a long-term marriage influences a widow's behavior may also be connected to the effects of aging.

Kingsberg (2000) argued that to understand and treat the effects of aging on sexuality, it is important to address sexual desire as it relates to drive, beliefs/values and motivation. She reasoned that essential to understanding sexuality is the balance of sexual capacities between two people and their perceptions of those capacities. The physical and psychological changes that occur as a result of aging can disturb this

equilibrium and result in a number of sexual problems. Kingsberg cited women's sense of identity, sensuality changes, and beliefs about aging (e.g., graying hair, wrinkles) as influencing factors for understanding poor body image and the loss of femininity late in life. Although she contended that society's image of menopausal women has evolved into a more youthful and energetic image, it has also created more pressure for women to continually meet the impossible ideal beauty standard. The myth of the asexual menopausal woman has been perpetuated in spite of the fact that, when heterosexual couples cease sexual activity, it is most often the result of physical changes in the man.

Kingsberg identified long-term abstinence created as a result of a husband's erectile dysfunction as a major challenge for older women who want to resume a sexual relationship after the death of a primary partner. Not only do women who have abstained from sexual activity need to make a cognitive shift to stimulate the desire for sex, older women also need time for their bodies to readjust to a partnered sexual life. For the majority of the widows in the present study, the husbands' declining health had halted sexual activity. To ignite a sexual desire that has been suppressed for many years may require more energy than these women want to spend in building a relationship with another man.

From the data, loneliness for the women in the present study was tied directly to how they felt about their husbands. It was the role their husbands provided in the social construction of their everyday reality which they missed. Essex and Nam (1987) argued that older women are more likely to feel lonely when they experience the loss of a major source of their definition of self. It was in the everyday interactions with a husband, regardless of the quality of relationship, that provided the widow with a positive self-

reflection; and, when the husband died, the loss of these reinforcing interactions led to a loneliness they had never experienced before.

Conclusion

The life reconstruction experiences for older women after the death of a husband in this study were largely consistent with other research regarding widowhood. The results certainly confirmed that from the moment a woman becomes a widow, she is faced with a changed social world that leaves her emotionally and physically distressed. Clearly, the death of a husband was the most significant life stressor for the majority of women in this study. The possible exception for four of the women may have been the death of children. While the themes of adjustment or coping behavior found in other research were similar, gender as an organizing institution was examined for the purpose of understanding how women's experiences in everyday life prior to the death of a husband may impact their successful adjustment to living alone.

The moment the husband died, almost every thing in the widow's everyday activities, including the loss of a gendered way of life which revolved around a husband and a couple world. The social world of the widows was organized around mutually exclusive gender roles. The female script that she had played for her entire adult life served as a cognitive anchor for her social reality. When the widows' husbands died, a way of life that was understood as normal no longer existed. Her slate of knowledge for dealing with everyday situations as an older woman living alone was mostly based on the experiences of other widows. She found that learning to live alone was a process. She had to adapt to a new social identity; and, she had to rediscover her sense of self. She had to adjust to the loss of the many roles her husband fulfilled in the marriage; and, she

had to accept the loss of her job in the marriage. Finding support from family and others meant negotiating relationships with children and developing new friendships. She had to discover new meaning and purpose; and, she had to reconcile the loneliness she felt as a result of her husband no longer sharing her everyday activities. Candid responses gathered from conversations with thirteen widowed women provided the framework for responding to the questions presented at the beginning of this study.

How does a widow achieve a successful adjustment to living alone?

Adjustment to living alone unfolded one day at a time for the widows in this study. Many of their daily tasks were much the same as before the husband's death. However, she had to decide if she wanted to perform those tasks (such as cooking and cleaning) for herself. Just as she had learned to manage and sustain a long-term marriage, as well as master the job of being a good wife and mother, she had to learn or "get used to" living alone. She had to master the husband's job in the marriage or find someone else to fulfill the vacated role. It also meant adjusting to the loss of their role as the wife in the partnership. Clearly, the loss of the wife role was disorienting because it represented who they had been for most of their lives. The death of a husband meant her services as a caregiver were no longer needed; and according to Wolfelt (1992), she had to reorganize and plan her life toward a future that did not include her husband. The degree of success achieved by the widows was very much connected to her self-confidence outside her married identity.

There is no question that gender-specific activities were acceptable norms in the marriages of the women in this study. Gender was such a powerful force in their lives that they saw their role in the marriage as nothing more than an obligation to follow the

traditions passed down by their mothers. The division of labor in the home, paid employment outside the home, and volunteer work was based on social expectations for this cohort of women. Adhering to the gendered expectations of what women were supposed to do provided meaning to their relationships with husbands, children, and other couple friends. They defined their lives based on the "here and now" rather than in terms of a much larger context which revolved around a social system organized to constrain behavior. They accepted a gendered way of thinking as something that was natural and according to God's plan. Because gender was an organizing agent in their marriages, which was reinforced through daily interactions with significant others, the loss of a gendered relationship contributed significantly to their disorganization and confusion after the deaths of their husbands. In order to restructure their lives as a woman living alone, they had to negotiate strategies within the limitation of their gender-based thinking. Building a new social reality required finding a place in their communities where they could nurture a new identity as a widow. The majority of the widows were able to accomplish this with other widows at church or in support groups.

How does a widow create a new identity after the death of a husband?

Van den Hoonaard (2001) used the term "identity disclosure" to describe the confusion widows experience when they discovered that they could no longer hang on to their identities as wives. This loss of identity was the most profound change faced by the widows. The participants in this study found their social identity was transformed almost immediately. Being a widow did not carry a social stigma, and it allowed them to remain somewhat attached to their husbands' identities. The majority also accepted being widowed as God's plan for their lives. They quickly discovered that there were many

women just like them. In developing a social network of other widows, their frequent interactions consistently reinforced their new status within their communities. Adjusting to a new self-image as a single woman was not as easy as moving into a new social identity.

The widows had spent their married lives as somebody's wife. For the majority, finding a personal identity after the death of their husbands meant they had to see themselves outside the context of being married. The three women who expressed some independence outside of their marriages were much better equipped to cope with this identity crisis. They had developed other avenues for fulfilling a meaning and purpose. These women were involved in volunteer organizations (the physician's wife held leadership positions within the organizations); and they participated in more social activities that did not include their husbands.

It is possible that some of the women in the present study may never establish a sense of self. For the older participants, advancing age limited long-term plans. Since being a widow does not carry a social stigma, accepting God's plan also allowed them to remain connected to their married identity. It is hard work to recreate a new identity after decades of being a wife, especially when that role was constantly reinforced in the relationships they shared with family and others in their social network

How does a widow restructure relationships after the death of a husband?

The death of a husband also meant the loss of the most important person in their social support system. Restructuring a new life required learning how to deal with the loss of the husbands' multiple roles (e.g., eating and traveling companion, bookkeeper, mechanic, and driver) within the marriage. Children were the most important source of

help in the early grief stage, especially if the widow lost functionality. The children's attentiveness waned as time passed; and, in some cases, the frequency of visits and contacts reverted to prewidowhood condition. Instrumental support was more prevalent than emotional support. The widows who leaned on children for emotional support were more likely to confide in daughters. Relationships with children did not improve after the death of the husband; but, in some cases, the children became more protective. There was an underlying assumption that the widow had lost her protector when the husband died. Maintaining independence was a balancing act between wanting the children's attention and not wanting to appear too needy. The participants did not want to be a burden to their children nor did they want to give up the independence they had gained as the result of the husband's death. There is no question that the death of a parent and the adjustment process that follows had a significant impact on the family dynamics for the majority of the widows in this study.

Other widows provided significant support during the rebuilding phase of adjustment. Interactions with couples dropped significantly. Becoming uncoupled initiated an identity crisis that is seldom experienced at the death of parents, children, or even close friends. The majority of widows no longer felt comfortable in social settings with other couples; and couple friends were unprepared to cope with a changed dynamic in their relationship with their widowed friend. The widows found it easier to build relationships with other widows who understood their grief and the problems they faced as older women living alone. They nurtured a new social identity in a community of widows within their churches and within other community settings (support groups, civic organizations and social clubs) where they could feel their marital status did not interfere

with their ability to connect with others. Interactions with other widows provided a safe place to rebuild self worth; and other widows replaced the role of social companion left empty by the husband's death. Interactions with other widows also validated their own experiences as widows and provided non-threatening relationships where they could share grief and memories.

Rosenberg and McCullough (1979) suggested that part of the grieving process in American society is the preservation of the deceased as a social person in the memories of those to whom he or she mattered. This usually begins during the funeral rituals and continues during the adjustment process. Lopata (1981) argued that it is in preservation of a husband's memories that women idealize their marriage relationships. She referred to this as "husband sanctification." Although the women did not describe their marriages as ideal, they certainly praised their husbands during the course of the interviews. It is possible that this "sanctification" was something that also occurred during interactions with other widows. It could be argued that interactions with other widows allowed them to remain connected to their husbands. At the same time, it may have hindered their ability to reconnect with old friends and develop new intimate friendships with other men.

Developing friendships with other men was not considered significant to their adjustment to living alone. The majority expressed no interest in developing a romantic relationship. They simply identified this as a lack of desire for another man. It is unclear if this was due to their unwillingness to get involved, the fact that many still felt married, the lack of available men in their social network, or something much more complicated that involved their perception of their own sexuality. The intense emotional loneliness

experienced was associated with an attachment bond they felt for their husbands; and they did not feel another man could fill that void. They had lived all their lives in a heterosexual world—a social world that promotes and celebrates romantic love between a man and a woman. They missed the hugs, the touching, and the little things their husbands did to make them feel special.

According to Scott and Jackson (1996), “sexuality cannot be understood without consistently paying attention to its intersection with gender” (p.169). People are not free consumers able to make lifestyle choices at will. Choices are limited by “institutionalised heterosexuality and gender hierarchy” (p.183). Clearly, the widows felt having a male companion was a necessary component to feeling comfortable in social settings with other couples. The need to have a man to boost self-esteem and provide prestige may very well affect older women’s choices about relationships. Although widows may not desire a sexual relationship, they may deny themselves the opportunity to seek intimacy in relationships with other women who can satisfy their need for human touch. Since heterosexuality is sanctioned by laws and religion as the cultural “norm” in social partnerships, widows may feel that developing intimate bonds with other widows would be viewed as “abnormal” or against God’s plan.

It may be beyond their scope of understanding to accept that intimacy can exist between two women without confusing their own feelings regarding sexuality. Considering the dwindling numbers of available men late in life, helping older women develop closer relationships with other women could improve their quality of life by reducing loneliness. However, this would require a major paradigm shift regarding their own sexuality and what “they think” constitutes homosexual thoughts.

How does a widow find new meaning and purpose after the death of a husband?

Although the majority of the husbands were retired for fifteen to twenty years, their roles within the marriage had changed little. Very few shared housework or cooking. It was still the wife's job to do what traditional homemakers were supposed to do—take care of her husband and the home. The women embraced their traditional role, and they considered the fulfillment of that role an important contribution to the success of their long-term marriages. Research (Hurd, 1999) has suggested that women who have primarily engaged in traditional female roles of wife and caregiver do consider the death of a husband a form of retirement. Although this retirement from the wife role gave the women in the present study freedom to act independently, they also felt lost.

The majority of the women found what they needed in something they had known most of their lives—religion. Their church provided a place to contribute to others in much the same way they contributed to their marriage (sewing, caregiving, cooking). In most situations, these were not new activities. However, these activities became the focus of their lives. The church also played a significant role in reorganizing their social world. Faith in an afterlife helped reconcile their separation from their husband as temporary. Their belief in God as the great comforter and provider became a substitute for the lost relationship. Since there was only one widow in this study who did not have religion as a social resource, it cannot be speculated that the lack of religion interferes with developing successful coping strategies. It may be said that religion can supply multiple resources of support for widows if it is in place before the death of a husband.

A longitudinal study (Atchley, 1997) found that subjective religiosity had no effect on health or well-being fourteen years after the death of a spouse. The researcher

concluded that faith in a higher power did not produce a positive correlation to well-being. It was church attendance and other social activities associated with a church community that produced positive effects. In looking at goals that related to positive health, valuing self reliance, close relationships with others, and serving others were at the top of the list (Atchley, 1997). However, other research (Fry, 2000) concluded that existential measures of personal meaning, religiosity and spirituality contributed more significantly to the variance of well-being than did demographic variables or other traditional measures such as social resources, physical health or negative life events. The widows in the present study channeled their relationship with God into their grieving and adjustment process in order to cope with the everyday tasks of living without a husband.

Although religion played the most dominant role in discovering new meaning and purpose, more involvement in the lives of children and grandchildren, helping other widows cope, and volunteer work were effective building blocks for life reconstruction. The participants who had interests outside their work during the marriage (volunteer and civic organizations) found that they already had another source of meaning and purpose. It provided a positive perspective on their own situations because they saw those they were helping as being less fortunate than themselves. Their connection with other volunteers also gave them another outlet for developing relationships.

Did they make a successful adjustment to living alone?

When asked if they felt they had made a successful adjustment to living alone, the widows clearly believed that they were making progress. When asked if they were happy, the majority felt "content" was a better way to describe their sense of well-being. Certainly, their personality traits, their age (there was a twenty-year age difference

between the youngest and the oldest), the length of time spent providing care to an ailing husband, and their current health status factored into their view of a successful adjustment. To really understand the contentment of the women in this study would require understanding the complexities of their individual situations. Research on life satisfaction for women 60 and over (Glass and Jolly, 1999) claimed a positive attitude was the most significant factor in satisfaction later in life. However, longitudinal research (Lu, 1999) revealed that personality traits could not account for the change in overall life satisfaction. Positive life events and social support accounted for a change in life satisfaction. Negative life events were found to be detrimental to happiness. Steeves (2002) argued that this intense loneliness does not disappear nor does it interfere with life reconstruction. The widows in the present study confirm that argument.

Research (Wolfelt, 1992) on bereavement and life reconstruction after the death of a loved one has suggested that placing social expectations on the bereaved to resolve their grief sets them up to fail. Professionals who serve in grief counseling must teach the bereaved and the general public that adjustment is a learned process that takes time. After spending more than two-thirds of their lives playing a role in a marriage that defined them socially and personally, older widows must rely on coping skills that are weakened as a result of diminished functionality. The majority of widows cope and discover that they can overcome most of the obstacles to living alone. Widows may find that life as an older single woman does not bring the same degree of life satisfaction they found in marriage; but they can discover contentment in relationships with others and they can find new meaning and purpose. The grief literature (Wolfelt, 1992) reviewed at the beginning of this study suggested that the healing process or the final stage of grief is

the acceptance of death. It is difficult to discern if the thirteen women in the present study had arrived at a final stage of healing. It is possible that for these women the final stage is the acceptance of loneliness, an emotional longing created by the death of a man who had shared the best and the worst of times. His death touched every part of her life physically, emotionally, and spiritually; and she would never be the same again. Coping one day at a time was the best the women in this study could hope for. In her final thoughts, widow Three articulated this acceptance best when she concluded: "I think all we ever do is adjust."

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

Although the themes of adjustment were remarkably similar, there were many other nuances of interest that could not be covered in the scope of this research. The twenty-year age variable certainly reflected very different perspectives regarding life reconstruction. A narrowing of the age variable between participants for research purposes could highlight the unique difficulties (health and isolation) facing women eighty and older. Since the widows relied on children for social and emotional support, research that focuses on understanding the dynamics of change in family systems after the death of a parent might enlighten adult children about how to best serve the needs of their widowed parents. The complexities of life reconstruction after the death of a spouse might warrant research that specifically targets widows who share similar challenges. Specifically focusing on widows whose husbands are long-term residents of healthcare facilities or who require constant homecare before their deaths could shed new light on issues that interfere with a successful transition to living alone. The women who provided informal healthcare to their husbands certainly expressed unresolved grief

issues that were not identified by those whose husbands remained physically independent until their deaths.

The review of literature did not produce a great deal of research regarding the differences between men and women's adjustment to living alone. This type of research would certainly benefit the study of widowhood and confirm that gender socialization, as a significant factor in successful adjustment, must be given consideration when providing help to widows and widowers.

Finally, in order to help older single women and men deal with loneliness, it might prove beneficial to research how loneliness is connected to their perceptions of sexuality and how those perceptions may hinder the nurturing of non-sexual intimate bonds with friends of the same sex.

Reflection

I found it important to examine the assumptions and biases which I might bring to the interview process before the commencement of data collection. All research is biased to the degree that the researcher brings to the process experiences that shape her social and psychological world. My mother-in-law has struggled to rebuild her life since the death of her husband five years ago. My thirty-five-year marriage certainly affects my thinking about how husband and wife interactions play out in everyday activities. I believe in a deity; and the weekly church services I attend shape my own notions regarding the benefits of faith and spirituality. I had to evaluate how all of these issues would influence my ability to effectively probe the participants for details regarding their experiences. This was an extremely difficult task that required a renewed effort before each interview. There were times during the course of the interviews when I revisited

specific questions to make sure that I was not reading my own meaning into the conversations. I also had to evaluate how my knowledge of gender as a social construct might influence the data collection process and analysis. I did not want the analysis to reflect victimization or inequalities that did not exist from the participants' perspectives. However, I did want to discover how gender socialization defined their married and widowed experiences. It is my hope that I have allowed the voices of the women to speak for themselves. There is no question that they provided me with new knowledge about how women negotiate the challenges of widowhood.

I find myself thinking often of the women who volunteered their time to participate in this project. Their willingness to reveal the emotional trauma created by the death of a husband allowed me to fully appreciate the overwhelming tasks involved in life reconstruction. When widow Two died shortly after our interview, I experienced an inexplicable sadness. I also wondered if the adjustment struggles she displayed during the interview influenced her death. I scrutinize the newspaper obituaries more closely hoping there will be no mention of "my" ladies. As a baby boomer woman, I wonder if my life experiences will better prepare me to deal with widowhood should my husband die before I do. Although I consider myself an "independent" woman who has enjoyed a rewarding career, while managing home and family obligations, my life is organized by gender and heterosexuality. My social activities are more often than not connected with others who fit into a couple world. In many ways, my life is not so different from the thirteen women in this study who were willing to relive their grief in order to help other women learn how to live without a husband to share their experiences.

Appendix A: Demographic Detail

Participant	Age	# of Years Widowed	Years Married	# of Children & proximity to widow	Education Achievement	Work History job or career during marriage
Widow 1	69	2	50	2 sons live close by	high school graduate	various part-time jobs
Widow 2	82	2	58	1 son out of state & 2 daughters live close by	no high school	part-time work as seamstress in local hospital
Widow 3	68	4	47	2 sons (with one living out of state) and one daughter	high school graduate	full-time for 28 years school cafeteria manager
Widow 4	81	5	52	2 sons out of state and 1 daughter lives close	college degree	elementary teacher and other part-time jobs
Widow 5	72	3	50	1 son lives close 1 daughter out of state	high school graduate	part-time work and handled bookkeeping for husband's business
Widow 6	81	3	57	6 children but only 1 lives close	no high school	part-time work as a housekeeper
Widow 7	82	3	54	3 daughters all live close by	no high school	part-time seamstress job and bookkeeping for husband's business
Widow 8	74	5	46	2 daughters only 1 lives close 2 sons out of state	college degree	17 years as a librarian
Widow 9	79	4	55	4 sons and 2 daughters with only 1 living close.	college degree	worked part-time in husband's business as the bookkeeper
Widow 10	86	2	56	1 son and 1 daughter both live close by	high school & vocational	part-time secretarial work
Widow 11	73	4	33	3 daughters with two living close by 1 son lives close	high school graduate	full-time work as a bookkeeper for a small retail chain
Widow 12	86	4	54	2 sons and 1 daughter all live out of state	college degree	did not work outside the home
Widow 13	71	5	47	4 daughters 2 live out of state	3 years of college	fulltime secretarial work after husband retired

Do you have family members that live close? If yes, who are those family members?

How often are you in contact with family and friends?

What types of support do they provide?

Have there been any conflicts with family members?

How do you feel about the quality of time you share with family members and friends?

Topic: How does a widow create a new identity?

- Guiding Themes:

—awareness of self

—grief reconciliation and acceptance of death

—finding a new role to replace the role of wife

—finding the self-confidence to build a new life

Examples of Specific Questions:

Describe how do you feel about yourself now?

Do you feel as if you are still married?

What kind of role do you feel you play now that you are no longer a wife?

Appendix B: Questionnaire Protocol

General Questions Used for Interviews with Widows

Topic: How does a widow restructure her life as an older woman living alone?

Guiding Themes:

- changes in everyday activities
- learning new roles or handling new responsibilities
- adopting new activities

Examples of Specific Questions:

- How has your life changed since the death of your husband?
- How have your daily activities change?
- What is the biggest challenge to living alone?
- Is there anything you like about living alone?
- Are you handling all the responsibilities that your husband handled when he was alive?

Topic: How does a widow renegotiate relationships with family members and other in her social network?

Guiding Themes:

- who provides maintenance and emotional support
- changes in relationships since death of husband
- frequency of contact with family and friends
- shared activities with family and friends
- quality of time shared with family and friends

Examples of Specific Questions:

- How has your relationship with family members changed since the death of your husband?
- How has the relationship with friends and others in your support network change?
- Do you have family members that live close? If yes, who are these family members?
- How often are you in contact with family and friends?
- What types of support do they provide?
- Have there been any conflicts with family members?
- How do you feel about the quality of time you share with family members and friends?

Topic: How does a widow create a new identity?

Guiding Themes:

- awareness of self
- grief reconciliation and acceptance of death
- finding a new role to replace the role of wife
- finding the self-confidence to build a new life

Examples of Specific Questions:

- Describe how do you feel about yourself now?
- Do you feel as if you are still married?
- What kind of role do you feel you play now that you are no longer a wife?

Do you feel strong enough to handle living alone?

Do you feel you have the resources to help you face the challenges?

Topic: How does a widow find new meaning as a woman living alone?

Guiding Themes:

---satisfaction with adjustment to living alone

---religion

---family and friends

---volunteerism or other service activities

Examples of Specific Questions:

What do you do for yourself that makes you feel better about living alone?

How does religion play a part in how you feel about living alone?

How does your family and friends factor into your sense of well-being?

How does what you do for others relate to how you feel about your life now?

I will not attempt to contact you. It is entirely your decision to participate. If you are willing to help me understand your adjustment to widowhood, you will be one of approximately twelve widows who will bring knowledge about your life experiences to this study. The results of this study will be used as a requirement for an academic degree, and the written report will be available for others to view. Your name will be excluded from all written materials.

If you are willing to volunteer approximately two hours of your time, please give me a call. I will be glad to answer any additional questions you may have regarding the process. Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Best Regards,

Peggy Miller
(574-533-6241)

Appendix C: Cover Letter

Dear Widow,

My name is Peggy Miller. I am a student at the Indiana University of South Bend, and I am currently working on a research project for a graduate degree. The attached study information sheet may be helpful in answering any questions regarding the purpose of the study.

The interviews for this study will take place from June of 2004 to September of 2004. If you are willing to participate, your interview will be scheduled to your convenience and at a location that you find comfortable. Confidentiality will remain intact throughout the process.

I will not attempt to contact you. It is entirely your decision to participate. If you are willing to help me understand your adjustment to widowhood, you will be one of approximately twelve widows who will bring knowledge about your life experiences to this study. The results of this study will be used as a requirement for an academic degree, and the written report will be available for others to view. Your name will be excluded from all written materials.

If you are willing to volunteer approximately two hours of your time, please give me a call. I will be glad to answer any additional questions you may have regarding the process. Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Best Regards,

Peggy Miller
574-533-6241

PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time.

Consent form date: (April 2, 2004)

Appendix D: Study Information Sheet

Study #04029

INDIANA UNIVERSITY – SOUTH BEND STUDY INFORMATION SHEET

Widows Making an Adjustment to Living Alone

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to understand how older widowed women adjust to living alone after the death of their husbands.

INFORMATION

This study involves your participation in a long interview that will require approximately two hours of your time. There will be approximately eight to twelve widows participating in the same study. The interviewer will pose some questions and ask for your candid responses. Your conversation will be tape recorded and transcribed for the purpose of submitting a written report for an academic degree requirement. The report may be published and it will be available for other students to view. The tapes will be destroyed within a year of your interview.

Benefits

Your responses will be used to create new knowledge that may provide helpful information to people who work with or provide a service to widowed women. This information may better serve the needs of widowed women as they adjust to living alone.

Confidentiality

Your name will not be used on the transcribed material. Your name will not be used in the final report and all precautions will be taken to protect your identity. The investigator will be the only person with access to your taped responses.

CONTACT

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Peggy Miller, at 722 Bainbridge Place, Goshen, IN 46526, 574-533-6241, and myjenna@covad.net.

If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research has not been honored during the course of this project, you may contact the office for the Indiana University Bloomington Human Subjects Committee, Carmichael Center L03, 530 E. Kirkwood Ave., Bloomington, IN 47408, 812/855-3067, by e-mail at iub_hsc@indiana.edu.

PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time.

Consent form date: (April 2, 2004)

Appendix E: Grief Support Information

If you need addition help in coping with unresolved grief, these services are offered in Elkhart County.

Grief Support Groups

Widowed Persons Service of Elkhart County

Elkhart County (AARP)

618 Emerson Street

Goshen, IN

574-533-4673

Contacts

Betty Stacy: 574-642-3692

Jewel Unzicker: 574-534-2340

Sandy Jacobs: 574- 537-0774

Understanding Grief Support Group

311 South Main

Goshen, IN

Contact: Carol Ehret @ 574-535-8940

Counseling Services

Oaklawn

330 Lakeview Drive

Goshen, IN

574-533-1234

(800) 282-0809

Madison Center

403 E. Madison Street

South Bend, IN

574-234-0061

(877) 234-0061

Bowen Center

850 N. Harrison Street

Warsaw, IN

574-267-7169

(800) 342-5652

Northeastern Center

107 W. Spring Street

LaGrange, IN

574-463-3872

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Vita page

Peggy Miller earned a Bachelor's Degree from Indiana University South Bend in 2002 with a major in sociology and a minor in psychology. She earned a Master's of Liberal Studies from Indiana University South Bend in May of 2005. Earning a college education was a life-long dream realized after taking an early retirement from a retail management career which began in 1969 and ended in 1999. She was hired as a cashier in her senior year of high school and advanced through the ranks earning an executive position supervising fourteen stores in northern Indiana/Michigan area. The knowledge gained from her college experience has given her a better understanding of her own life's journey as well as a better understanding of others. She plans to use the knowledge acquired in this thesis to design and implement an effective grief ministry for her church and community.

